

In brief

What Private family garden, using climate-appropriate planting inspired by English gardens.

Where Near Madrid, Spain.

Size 2,800 square metres.

Soil Infertile, stony red clay over limestone.

Climate Mediterranean, with sharp overnight frosts in winter, and temperatures of 40°C common in summer. Little rain.

Hardiness rating USDA 8.

European union

In this contemporary hilltop garden near Madrid, Spanish designer Fernando Martos has combined the wild beauty of Spain's arid landscape with planting ideas borrowed from the English garden tradition

WORDS NOËL KINGSBURY PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS



Mass planting of the grey-leaved *Stachys byzantina* helps link the garden to the landscape beyond. Bright notes of colour come from the pinkish *Salvia nemorosa* 'Ostfriesland', the deep-purple *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' and the bicoloured *Iris* 'Syncopation'.



Designer Fernando Martos.

Central Spain is not the most hospitable of gardening environments. Winters are cold, while summers can be intensely hot for long periods and with little rain. Traditionally, Spanish gardens have followed French or Italian models, but now a new generation of garden designers is emerging, inspired by a love of the Spanish landscape and the plant communities that naturally thrive here.

“I was originally drawn to the Italian style of garden,” says Fernando Martos, one of this new generation of Spanish designers. “But after an internship at Newby Hall in Yorkshire, I became mad about English gardens. Everyone said that the climate in Spain creates too many problems, but I am trying to get the English look using Mediterranean-climate plants.”

Fernando, who trained at Escuela de Paisajismo y Jardinería Castillo de Batres, a privately run landscaping and gardening school in Madrid, began experimenting with such plants at his family home near Seville. Then, ten years ago, some friends asked him to make a family garden for them just outside Madrid, and the result reads like a manifesto for a new style of Spanish garden.

This is a garden that immediately grabs the attention but is at the same time totally of its place. Hummocks of pruned lavender and other low, dry-climate shrubs dominate but are interspersed with clouds of fine-textured grasses, particularly *Stipa tenuissima*, and the sword thrusts of bearded iris foliage. In winter shrubs predominate, but in summer and



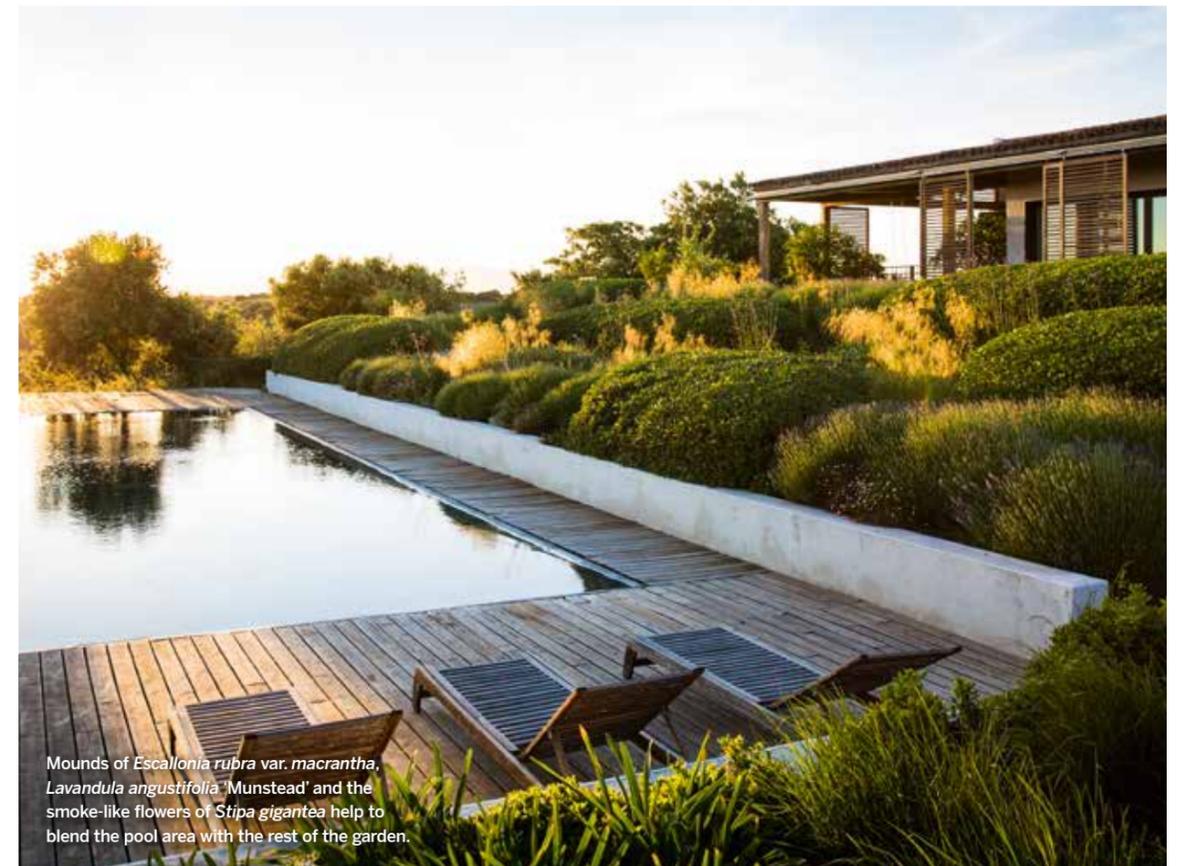
Moving down the slope from the house, tufts of *Stipa tenuissima* give way to hummocks of *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead' mixed with *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant'.



The pine decking creates a walkway from a smooth lawn to wilder planting beyond. A pair of holm oaks (*Quercus ilex*) frame the view out over the valley in the far distance.



The low-growing mix of grasses, shrubs and perennials mimics the surrounding landscape. Bicoloured iris hybrids, pink-edged 'Syncopation' and red-edged 'Supreme Sultan', add colour.



Mounds of *Escallonia rubra* var. *macrantha*, *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead' and the smoke-like flowers of *Stipa gigantea* help to blend the pool area with the rest of the garden.

▷ autumn they are almost concealed by grasses, perennials and the self-sowing annuals *Verbena bonariensis* and *V. stricta*.

“What I like about the English garden, and what I want to achieve here, is a loose natural look that includes movement and seasonal changes, particularly with colour,” says Fernando. “The typical Mediterranean garden is very static, it never changes. I want to make gardens that appear different every time you look at them. Change gets people excited.”

The matrix of the planting here is made up of ‘classic’ Mediterranean shrubs – various cistus, grey-leaved lavenders, such as the smaller-growing *Lavandula angustifolia* ‘Munstead’ and ‘Hidcote’, and the silvery *Helichrysum italicum* subsp. *serotinum* – which are regularly pruned. Pruning may be time-consuming but as Fernando explains it improves the lifespan of the plants and partly replicates the way animals would naturally feed on these plants in the wild. Fernando is particularly keen on *Cistus x skanbergii*, which forms low hummocks and smothers itself in pink flowers in spring. “Hybrid cistus flower for longer and don’t seed,” he explains. “And they live longer.”

While the shrubs provide a solid framework and continuity throughout the year, it is the perennials and grasses that add the element of change and ‘fun’ Fernando feels is such an important part of the English garden tradition. Among these are bearded irises, which flourish in this climate and need very little maintenance, and Fernando has used two newer iris hybrids, *Iris* ‘Syncopation’ and *I.* ‘Supreme Sultan’, which he says flower longer than older cultivars. He feels the leaves also provide summer interest and loves the combination of iris leaves with the frothy flower heads of the grass *Stipa tenuissima*.

For Fernando, however, the biggest inspiration is nature. The combination of grasses and low shrubs that characterise this garden is very much at the core of the *maquia*, the Spanish name for the wild habitat that covers much of this part of the country, and the same strong aromatic scent hangs over this garden as it does in the wild. But for a garden, nature needs to be managed, and the frequent pruning not only keeps the shrubs neat and long lived, but can also, with some modest irrigation, result in multiple flowering seasons. *Perovskia atriplicifolia*, for example, flowers three times a year if deadheaded, while ▷



Grasses and a colourful mix of yellow *Phlomis* ‘Edward Bowles’, the striking bicour *Iris* ‘Syncopation’, purple *Nepeta* ‘Six Hills Giant’ and pink *Centranthus ruber* var. *coccineus* add movement and vibrancy to the low-growing lavenders and gentle mounds of *Cistus x skanbergii* behind.

Planning a dry garden

Choose plants from regions with a long, hot, dry season that have a ‘low water requirement’ rather than tolerance to drought.

Encourage plants to root deeply by breaking up the soil in the planting hole as deeply as possible at the base. Water infrequently and heavily; ‘little and often’ only encourages surface rooting.

Plant when small. Older or larger container-grown plants will have shallow root systems, which make them vulnerable to heat and drought.

Grow plants ‘lean’ and don’t feed them. Plants are more resilient if grown slowly. Feeding plants from stressful environments may result in several years of strong growth followed by a sudden demise.

Mulching keeps moisture in the soil and, crucially, roots cool. Chipped bark is good, but gravel or other mineral mulches are better, but only if the soil in the planting is not going to be disturbed.

Irrigation is essential for plants to look good, rather than just survive. But as some plants, such as lavenders, suffer an increased risk of fungal disease, plants should be grouped according to their irrigation needs.

Ugly irrigation pipes can be disguised with mulch. Drip irrigation systems where pipes lead water to individual plants are the most economical.

▷ lavenders repeat-flower in autumn alongside sedums and nepeta.

Fernando's design style looks firmly to the future, but in one respect he is also re-inventing tradition: "I like formal entrances with no colour," he says, and indeed the entrance to the house is like a modernist restatement of traditional formality with a solid block of the grass *Miscanthus sinensis* and another of the evergreen shrub *Escallonia macrantha*. It creates a real sense of surprise when you turn the corner to see the tamed *maquia* spread out below the house, showing off a planting style that represents an exciting new chapter for Spanish garden design. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Fernando Martos. Tel + 34 686 650, fernandomartos.com/en/

Combinations

Light and airy

Teucrium fruticans (1) – clipped into mounded shapes – dominates here, its spring flowers add to the beauty of the grey foliage that complements the *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' (2). Several clumps of *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' (3) add bulk while, in the background, the taller *Stipa gigantea* (4) is illuminated by backlighting – crucial to make the most of this early flowering grass.

Golden glow

Backlit grass *Stipa tenuissima* (1) grabs the attention here, its feathery plumes complementing the more defined *Phlomis russeliana* (2). In the foreground *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' (3) is in full flower, about to be joined by similarly toned *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' (4) and yellow *Achillea filipendulina* 'Parker's Variety' (5). Further back, the silver-leaved *Stachys byzantina* (6) makes a dramatic intervention among a drift of lavenders.

Bright and bold

Surrounding an airy clump of *Stipa tenuissima* (1) the golden-yellow *Phlomis* 'Edward Bowles' (2), the densely shrubby hybrid *Achillea filipendulina* 'Parker's Variety' (3), and the richly coloured *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' (4) and *Iris* 'Syncopation' (5) – all plants that have a low water requirement – create a light and fluid composition. Behind is a veil of *Stipa gigantea* (6) flower heads – these airy displays never block views, but add extra sparkle.

Soft curves

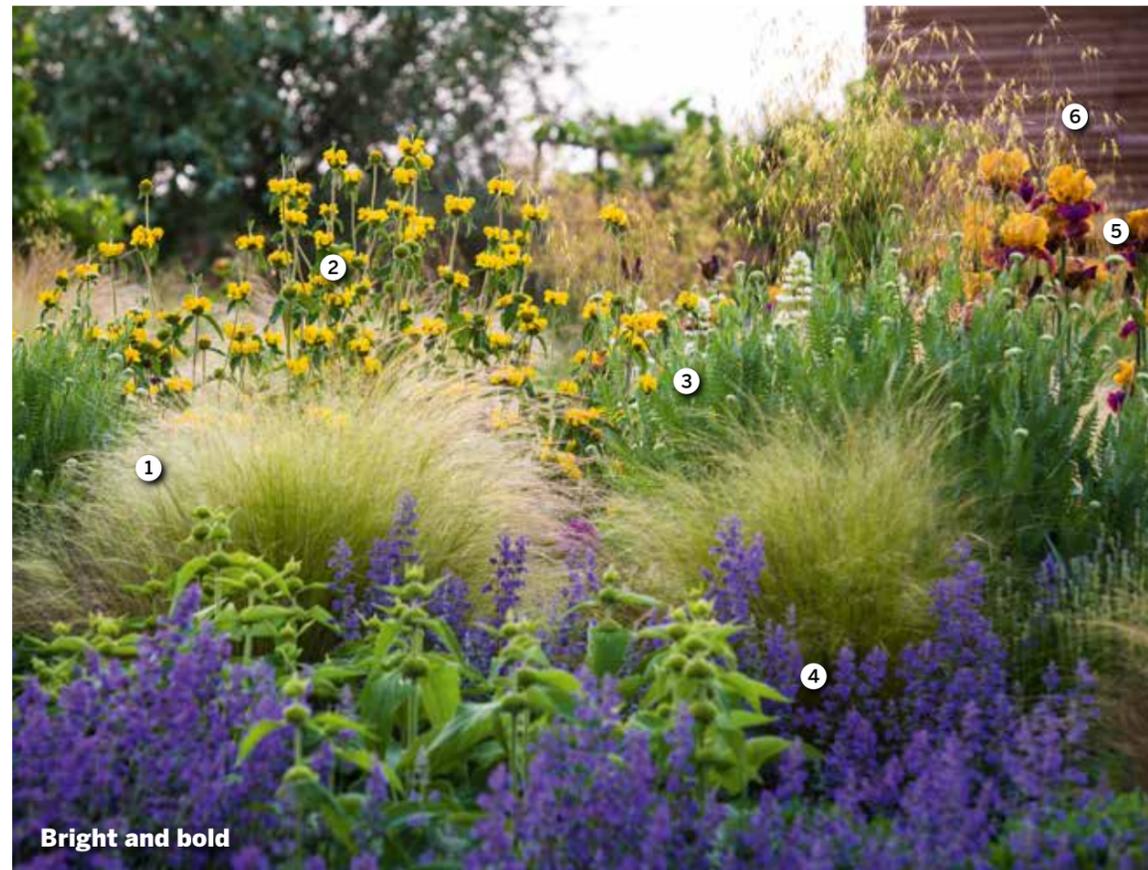
A *Quercus ilex* (1) trunk links the garden to the landscape. A soft mound of the flower-covered *Cistus x skanbergii* (2) echoes the curve of the grass *Sesleria autumnalis* (3), which slowly forms tight mats of pale foliage that complements the colours around it. Behind, the more flamboyant *Stipa gigantea* (4) draws the eye towards drifts of *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' (5) and *Stachys byzantina* (6).



Light and airy



Golden glow



Bright and bold



Soft curves